

ON YETI TRACKS

This April, having spent the hottest part of the year in the Central Australian desert, I felt the urge to get out of that tired red country and clear my head among some mountains. I had always wanted to walk in the valleys around Mount Everest and remember, as a boy, going to a slide-lecture of the Hillary-Tensing climb and forming a very vivid impression of rivers rushing with snowmelt, bamboo bridges, forests of rhododendrons, Sherpa villages and yaks. I wanted to see the Tibetan Buddhist monasteries that lie on the Nepalese side of the frontier. As for the Yeti, I wanted to explore, at first hand, that nebulous area of zoology where the Beast of Linnaean classification meets the Beast of the Imagination.

From Sydney, I called my wife and told her, firmly, to meet me in Nepal.

'I can't,' Elizabeth said in a dispirited voice. Her favourite aunt was having her ninetieth birthday party in Boston.

'The offer's open,' I said. 'Call me if you change your mind.'

'I've changed it.'

The Everest region is known as Khumbu Himal and to reach it you must either trek for a week over three high passes, or fly to Lukla where the airstrip tilts off the mountainside at an angle of 25°. The weather was foul: a series of cyclones in the Bay of Bengal had made nonsense of the forecast. Twice we took off, ran into turbulence, and returned to Kathmandu. On

our third try, the pilot nosed the plane under a purplish cloudbank, threaded along a forested valley, and finally approached the runway from below rather than above.

The passengers cheered as we bounced onto the gravel; the bags were chucked clear and, as the plane reloaded, we took our first gulps of thin air. Sir Edmund Hillary could be seen striding about shaking hands with a film crew. High above, I heard a cuckoo, not a kookaburra, calling. Then Elizabeth, who is also an amateur botanist, pointed to a tree with huge white flowers that seemed to hang out of the clouds.

'Look!' she called. '*Magnolia campbellii*.'

A dashing young Sherpa pressed forward and introduced himself as our sirdar. His name was Sangye Dorje — which means 'Thunder-Lion'. He moved with a certain military precision; and in his peaked cap, his waisted green tunic, boots and breeches, he could have played the role of a Kalmuck lieutenant in a pre-war Soviet movie. He was always cheerful, always resourceful, and had the habit of prefacing his statements with 'I have something to say', and of closing with 'That is all I have to say'.

The cook was his old school friend Nima Tashi, who was a wizard at sticky cakes and whose left cheek was scarred with a yak-horn cornada. The third Sherpa, Pasang Nuru, was forever whirling prayer-wheels. Lastly, the cook's boy, Tham, a Magar from Central Nepal, was a shy doe-eyed boy of infinite sweetness and theatrical temperament, who wore a scruffy red knitted cap as if it were Pulcinello's.

Mountain Travel, the organisation which had made our paltry arrangements as well as those of the Everest Expedition, had promised us ten porters. But most Sherpas were off planting potatoes and, anyway, we were better off with three yaks — or rather, three dzoms, which are a cross between a yak and a cow.

We strolled around Lukla while they loaded up. Wood-

smoke drifted placidly from the houses; the windows were painted in bright Tibetan colours; the fields were knee-high in green barley, and there were apple trees in flower. Behind the village we saw the remains of a crashed Twin Otter, whose fuselage served as a latrine, its wings as a goat-fence, and its engines as an ornament to the Buddha Lodge Hotel. At Lukla, the windsock is also a prayer-flag.

On coming back I pointed to a hermitage high on the mountainside among red rhododendrons.

'Who lives there?' I asked Sangye.

'One nun.' He screwed up his face, and grinned. 'But now not a nun because she make a baby.'

'Who was the father?'

'One monk.'

The cloud cleared as we started up the road to Namche Bazaar. The road was about three feet wide. The wind soughed in the pines; the river echoed in its gorge; the mountains glittered and the dzom-bells clanged. Sangye and Pasang whistled between their teeth, thwacked the animals on the rump, shouted, 'DZOM! DZOM!' and we all felt the exhilaration that comes at the start of a journey.

'Sherpa' means 'Easterner' in Tibetan; and the Sherpas who settled in Khumbu about 450 years ago are a peace-loving Buddhist people from the eastern part of the plateau. They are also compulsive travellers; and in Sherpa-country every track is marked with cairns and prayer-flags, reminding you that Man's real home is not a house, but the Road, and that life itself is a journey to be walked on foot.

Sangye said that each thread blown from a prayer-flag was a prayer blown straight to Heaven.

Every half mile or so, we would pass a wall of stone slabs, each one carved with the mantra *Om mani padmê Hum* — 'Om! Jewel in the Lotus! Hum!' (The jewel in question is Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Infinite Compassion, while the Om

and Hum represent the Height and Depth of the Universe.) Sangye was very anxious we should walk round these prayer-walls in a clockwise direction, that is, to follow the Way of the Heavens – 'Or else,' he said, 'everything will go wrong.' When Elizabeth forgot, he smiled and said, 'Never mind! Not so many OMs on that one!'

We stopped for the night at Phakhding in a grove of pines beside the river. In the next-door camp was an expedition of British Army officers, one of whom wore a T-shirt reading 'The Falkland Islands are beautiful and British'. Another officer said the War had been a 'necessary bit of blood-letting, what?'

'Idiots,' I said to myself, as I rolled over to sleep.

Around ten next morning we stopped at the tea-house of an old Japanese solitary – a character from the travel diaries of Bashō, with a long wispy beard and baggy red trousers that shone with dirt. He was hoeing his vegetables and, while his boy made the tea, he came over to talk. He was an expert in the grafting of fruit trees. In Japan he had worked for the Government forestry service and had come here, on retiring, eight years ago.

'I had no children,' he said. 'I had no house. Why should I not come and live among these mountains?'

After crossing the torrent of Bhote Khosi, the track then zigzagged up a cliff and we had our first view of Everest to the east. Streams of snow were blowing off the summit. On ahead was Khumbu Ylha, the Sacred Mountain of the Sherpas, rearing its triangular peak above a throne of puffy white clouds. We kept passing short, brown, bandy-legged men bent double under loads of rice and millet which they were carrying to the Saturday market at Namche.

'Lowlanders,' said Sangye contemptuously. 'From five days down.'

Namche is a small town built in terraces around the bowl of a valley, like the seats of an Ancient Greek theatre. Its merchants traffic in every kind of leftover from mountaineering expeditions: Spanish quince paste, French packet soup, Swiss crampons, German oxygen cylinders, freeze-dried cheesecake from the U.S.A., and British bully-beef. The market began at sunrise and, from our campsite, sounded like a swarm of bees. I saw a party of monks arriving to buy provisions. Most of them were wearing European cast-offs – the yellows, reds and oranges of high-altitude gear corresponding to the orthodox colours of Tibetan Lamaism.

Before leaving for Thame Monastery, we visited the town *gompa*, which is the equivalent of the parish church. In the courtyard an aged lama was chatting to a scrawny Tibetan already loaded up with buffalo-skins. The man was a smuggler. To reach Tibet he would have to avoid the Chinese Army, cross two glaciers, and climb a pass of 19,000 feet. The lama was about to bless him. He needed it.

Inside the *gompa* we were shown into a dusky room lit with flickering butter lamps and frescoed with the bestial or benevolent Tibetan divinities, whose identity we tried to puzzle out. We saw a rather down-at-heel statue of Guru Rimpoche, the legendary proselytiser of Tibet. I then paused in front of a bull-headed, thousand-armed Demon and said, facetiously enough, that anyone who believed in such a creature was in a fit state to 'see' the Yeti.

All along the track to Thame there were clumps of blue iris and gentians the size of sapphire studs. Soon we came to a lovely wood of birch trees, leafless as yet, with peeling orange bark and beards of jade green lichen festooned from their branches. We passed through stands of pale pink rhododendrons and, as we ambled along, I asked Sangye Dorje whether he believed in the Yeti.

'I do,' he said, and went on to explain how there were two

kinds of Yeti: the *miñ-teh* which killed people, and the *dzu-teh* which killed only animals.

'But Yeti', he added sombrely, 'is also some kind of God.'

He promised that when we got to his own village, Khumjung, he would introduce me to a woman who was actually attacked by the beast. Usually, he said, a person who looked into Yeti's eyes was doomed to die: but she had been the exception.

Nima Tashi and Tham had gone on ahead to cook lunch. We found them boiling rice and lentils in the ruins of a water-mill and, while we waited, we lay on the turf and watched the cumulo-nimbus playing games to outwit the sun. Later, in the village of Thome (which means 'Way Up') we ran in with some novice monks coming back from market. They were all singing at the tops of their voices. The smallest was wallowing out the rhythm on an oil-can, and a wizened old monk followed wearing purple rags and a sou'wester.

'Ask him', I said to Sangye, 'whether *he* has ever seen the Yeti.'

'Not I,' the old man smiled. 'But my aunts did.' His two aunts had been pasturing their sheep when the whole flock suddenly poured off the mountain with the Yeti in pursuit.

'How did it look?' I asked.

'Bigger than a man,' the monk said, 'with terrible yellow eyes, arms almost touching the ground, red hair growing upwards from the waist, and a white crest on top.'

'Likely story,' murmured Elizabeth.

I thanked the monk and walked on ahead with one of the novices. His name was Pama Jhablan. He was sixteen, and had a head of bootbrush hair and an extremely determined expression. He spoke excellent English, having lived for seven years in Darjeeling, which he seemed to think was some kind of Gomorrah. He said he would never kill a living thing, NEVER, NEVER, not even if a monster attacked him. The idea of taking a

woman was NOT POSSIBLE, and he looked forward to living his whole life in the mountain monastery.

'All my life,' he repeated with some insistence. 'IN PRAYER.'

It was snowing when we got to Thame Og. There were a few rough stone houses reminding you of houses in the west of Ireland, and mounds of yak dung in the potato fields. We spent a freezing night at 12,500 feet and, at sunrise, climbed to the monastery, which lay perched on the side of a cliff. My friend Pama was there to show us the preparations for the Mani Rimdu Festival. He thumped the great drum. Then he allowed me to handle the skin of a 'fish-monster' which I had seen strung up among the dance masks: it was, I believe, a pangolin.

He also tried to sell me an engraved amber bead which, so he said, had been given him by his mother.

'Keep the bead,' I said, and slipped him the money as we went away.

We walked until mid-afternoon and had reached the outskirts of Khumjung when Sangye called out, 'Bruce! You remember about the Yeti lady? There she is!'

We shinned over the wall and greeted Lakpa Doma, a handsome woman in her thirties with polished red cheeks and a dazzling smile. She wore heavy gold earrings, a striped Sherpa woman's apron, and was mattocking her field while her old mother cut potato slips for planting.

This was Sangye's version of her story:

One day in 1974 she was tending her family's yaks in a summer pasture near Macchermo when the Yeti sprang on her from behind a rock, dragged her to the stream, but then dumped her and went on to slaughter three of the yaks simply by twisting their horns. The beast had the same yellow eyes, big brow-ridges and hollow temples. Some policemen came up from Namche to examine the yak carcasses and stated, categorically, that the killer had never been a man.

'I suppose it was a *dzu-teh*?' I said.
'It was,' said Sangye Dorje.

We waved goodbye to the ladies and came to the door of Sangye's house, where we were to spend the night. We picked our way through a pitch-dark woodstore and climbed upstairs into a long warm room with brightly polished tables, bright rugs and a rack of copper cauldrons decorated with swastikas. His mother served countless cups of Tibetan tea and we peered at his baby boy, asleep in a pile of sheepskins.

Then, at sunset, we went to call on the Ger Lama.

He was a holy wanderer, who came here from Tibet about twenty-eight years ago, living in caves and herdsman's huts until he persuaded the villagers to help him build a hermitage. He had been once to Kathmandu, but never again. Mountains and solitude, he said, were essential to a life of prayer. He received us, sitting cross-legged in a small scarlet room painted with lotus flowers. His alarm clock, his books and sacred images were all well within his reach. One day, he said, he would return to Tibet, but whether in this life or the next, he was unsure. He blessed us each with a scarf of white gauze, and we went away, marvelling.

Next morning we went to see the famous 'Yeti scalp' which is preserved at the Khumjung *gompa*. The guardian had goitre. From a locked box he pulled out a hairy leather cap shaped a bit like a Mongol helmet, moulded in one piece and dyed with henna. There were several neat holes pierced around the lower edge, probably for the attachment of a brim.

'Must be some kind of dance hat,' I said.

'But what's the skin?' whispered Elizabeth.

'Old goat,' I whispered back; for this 'scalp' and the one at Pangboche are supposed, according to expert opinion, to be made from a wild goat called the serow.

'But whatever it is,' I went on, 'it's certainly not a fake.'

I put a banknote in the guardian's hand, and we left the village.

'Well?' asked Sangye sometime later. He sounded quite anxious. 'What did you think about Yeti?'

We were walking to Gokyo along the vertiginous track that follows the flank of Khumbu Ylha. Yaks were grazing up to the skyline, and in among them was a herd of wild goats, their reddish hair blowing about in the breeze. The day was bright and cloudless and the snowy peaks across the valley seemed to be cut from cardboard.

'I don't know,' I said to Sangye, not sure what to say. For what, indeed, could one say? What did I, or any other Westerner, really know about the Yeti?

I knew, for example, that Yetis or similar species had been knocking about European literature since the Elder Pliny (Natural History VII, 9) described a race of 'wild men' who lived in the Mountains of Imaeus (the Eastern Himalaya), moved with astonishing speed, and had huge feet turned back-to-front. I knew that the Sherpas, too, believed that Yeti had his feet turned back. I knew that several tough-minded mountaineers, such as Eric Shipton or Sir John Hunt, had not only photographed Yeti footprints in the snow, but had heard the Yeti shrieking. I also knew that Hillary's 'scientific' expedition had failed to find the least trace of the creature, had sent the Pangboche 'scalp' to America for analysis, and had suggested that the 'tracks' were those of the snow-leopard or Tibetan blue bear, enlarged by the melting sun.

Of course, I reflected, it was *just* conceivable that some giant orang-outang-like ape had survived in the High Himalaya: but I, for one, was sceptical. I believed, rather, that Yeti was (for want of a better term) a creature of the Collective Unconscious. Man, after all, is the inventor of his own monsters. Babies 'see' monsters long before they are shown them in picture books. Milarepa, the Himalayan sage, 'saw' a Yeti at the entrance to his cave. St Anthony 'saw' his fan-

tastical menagerie in the Desert. Hairy 'devils' did actually 'possess' the Salem witches; and only a few weeks earlier I had watched, in a school near Alice Springs, some Aboriginal children drawing an ape-like ogre from their mythology – in a continent that never saw an ape until the coming of the whites.

I believed, too, that the people most likely to 'see' Yetis were either simpletons or schizoprenics; religious ascetics or the very poor (both liable to protein deficiency); or those at high altitude with a diminished supply of oxygen to the brain. Perhaps Yeti was a mountain hallucination. But how could I explain this to Sangye?

'You're right,' I said, finking the issue. 'Yeti must be some kind of God.'

Around midday we reached a ridge where a well-heeled party of American bird-watchers had stopped to rest beside a Buddhist shrine. We talked to the wife of a San Francisco broker, who owned her own computer software business and seemed a bit puffed. We also had an intense conversation with a lone trekker, a Jewish Bruce from Boston, who wangled two eggs from our picnic and pitied our ignorance of computer technology.

Near Everest Base Camp, this Bruce had run into a professional Yeti hunter, a Scotsman, and had asked him for news of the Loch Ness Monster.

'Bah!' the Scot had snapped. 'Only loonies look for the Monster.'

We slept under a pale moon at the yak-herding settlement of Labharma where Sangye had the key to a hut. Stalactites of soot hung from its rafters. Over the hearth there was a rack for drying cheese and, on the door, a set of claw marks.

'Probably a Yeti,' Sangye sniggered: the Yeti was by now our standing joke.

The Yeti was even more of a joke in the morning when we

got to Macchermo and inspected the scene of Lakpa Doma's rape. Sangye growled; Pasang pulled a Yeti-face, and I imitated the walk of Groucho Marx. We then climbed up alongside the Ngozumpa Glacier and came out into a blinding bright landscape of snow and naked rock and green lakes half-frozen over. On a patch of open water a ruddy shelldrake was nibbling at some weed. Elizabeth was watching him through binoculars when I happened to turn round – and blinked.

'Look!' I blurted out. 'Yeti tracks!'

'Oh yeah?' drawled Elizabeth, and went on watching the shelldrake.

'Look at them!'

On the north-facing slope behind us there was a line of very strange footprints. They were each about fifteen inches long, wider at the toe than the heel, and on some you saw – or thought you saw – the imprint of a giant big toe. They approached the base of an almost vertical bank, stopped, continued on the slope higher up, and finally petered out along a rocky ridge. I reckoned that the creature had jumped at least eight feet into the air and twelve along. The tracks were perhaps a day old and had melted a little: even so, I could see that they hadn't been made by any of the usual contenders – yak, blue bear, snow-leopard, langur monkey, human or human hoaxer. No hoaxer could have jumped that high, yet the Sherpas say that Yeti habitually jumps his own height and more. The strange thing was that its foot had scuffed the snow on the way up – unless it really was a Yeti-with-the-feet turned-back, in which case the jumper had been jumping down.

I was sure there must be some logical explanation and called Sangye over.

'Did you ever,' I asked, 'on any of your treks, see anything like them?'

'Never,' he said, darkly. 'They were not made by men.'

'Then who made them?'

'Same as Yeti.'

I still have no idea what these 'Yeti tracks' were. My whole life has been a search for the miraculous: yet at the first faint flavour of the uncanny, I tend to turn rational and scientific. After this excitement, the whole party was infected with Yeti-fever and kept 'seeing things' on every mountain. On Cho Oyu we thought we saw Reinhold Messner manoeuvring across an ice-fall. He was on the mountain that day, but not where we could see him, and the 'thing' we did see turned out to be a pinnacle of rock, doubling and tripling as our eyes watered in the wind.

We camped at Gokyo and in the afternoon I climbed the summit of Gokyo Ri where, gasping for oxygen at 18,000 feet, I propped myself against a stone cairn and, while the wind ripped at the prayer-flags, gazed dully at the ring of blue-and-white peaks – Cho Oyu, Everest, Lhotse, Nuptse and, far to the east, the cone of Makalu.

The sky was all but cloudless; a stream of grey vapour crept up the valley from India, and above it, in the opposite direction, a few shreds of cumulus came blowing out of Tibet. I could see the Gyubanare Glacier snaking down from the Pass of Shangri La. And it occurred to me how easy it would be, in this incandescent atmosphere, to 'see' the real Shangri La as described by the mystics – the Valley of Eternal Youth, always lying somewhere to the North, where the houses are roofed with gold and the streambeds shimmer with precious stones.

Back at the camp, Sangye had shut himself in his tent with an old shaman and the two were chanting hymns to propitiate the Mountain Gods. The shaman said that sometimes people saw a monastery floating in the middle of Gokyo Lake. At sundown it started to freeze. I had a headache and could only sleep fitfully. All night I heard, or imagined, strange rumbles and half-expected a hairy hand to rip through the roof of the

tent. It was good to see the dawn and Elizabeth stirring in her sleeping-bag.

'Did you sleep?' I asked.

'No,' she yawned. 'I heard funny noises.'

'What kind of noises?'

'Thumps.'

After Gokyo the weather turned sour. Clouds hung below the snowline and snowflakes whizzed in our faces. We stopped at a tea-house called 'Cho Oyu View' where the boy called out 'Milik tea or balak tea?' and gave us boiled potatoes and hot chile peppers. We got stuck behind a caravan of fourteen yaks nose to tail which Elizabeth said looked like a 'hairy black centipede'. Across the main valley we saw the monastery of Thyangboche and heard the weird music of horns and cymbals carried on the morning wind. When, after two days, we got to Pangboche, we realised from the continuous stream of porters and white men with rucksacks that we'd rejoined the Everest trunk-route.

Pangboche *gompa* is a square red-washed building with the presence of a Palladian villa and an alley of windblown junipers leading up to it. Among its treasures is the second 'Yeti-scalp'. It is the oldest shrine in the Khumbu and was founded by Sangye Dorje's namesake, an acrobatic lama who lived about four hundred years ago and could fly back and forth across the Himalayas at will.

The guardian, a poetic soul reeking of rancid yak butter, removed the altar frontal and showed us a dent in the rock where the lama had landed. Like other Tibetan levitators, this Sangye Dorje seems to have had little control of his airbrakes and was always leaving dents in the landscape where he crashed. Cases of concussion, however, are unknown.

On the upper floor, we saw the lama's portrait, which showed a young man with luminous white skin and masses of flowing chestnut hair. Apparently, he'd been very proud of

this hair but, on settling at Pangboche, had obeyed an ascetic impulse, chopped it off, chucked it out, and the junipers had sprouted where it fell.

We then inspected the 'scalp', which was identical to the Khumjung specimen, except that there were rather more holes. I also saw, stored in a rack with the ceremonial masks, a pair of cartwheel hats made of the same reddish goat skin, thus confirming my impression that they all belonged to some kind of ritual costume. The guardian, however, had a different tale. This particular Yeti, he said, had fallen for the young lama; had grown tame in his company; had learned to fetch his wood and water; and when it died, the lama had cut off the scalp and kept it in memory of their friendship.

'Hm!' said Elizabeth. 'Beauty and the Beast!'

We pressed on eastward, but the weather disintegrated terribly. We had intended to climb Kalar Datar, an easy peak from which, on a clear day, you get the best view of Everest. There seemed little point in fog and snow, so we holed up in the rest-house at Pheriche and read. Some of the trekkers looked rather emaciated and were far too obsessed by their next meal to listen to cock-and-bull stories about the Yeti. Eventually, after three dismal days, we decided to beat it back to a warmer altitude.

On the way we stopped at Thyangboche where the novices put on a horn concert for our benefit. At Kyangzuma we saw a musk deer flitting past; and we watched the mating dance of the Impeyan pheasant, a dazzling bird whose plumage seemed to be composed of electricity. Once we got below Namche, every leaf had burst open and Elizabeth's botanical enthusiasms took over, she yanked at branches, sniffed flowers, and called out Latin names with the conviction of a woman who knows her own mind. We also met a young English climber who had found, on the edge of a glacier, a scuba diver's flipper.

'So,' I said to myself. 'The Yeti hoaxer!' — until I remembered that no flipped hoaxer could possibly have jumped eight feet into the air — or, for that matter, jumped down backwards.

Then we went down to Lukla to catch the plane.

We arrived in a rainstorm and, for three days, we waited for the cloud to clear. Lukla was full of stranded trekkers, some of whom had missed their cheap charter flights, and mooned about with an air of quiet desperation. Elizabeth called them the 'down-at-the-mouthers'.

Other passengers were more vocal and kept haranguing the poor Nepali airline official with lists of their business appointments in London, Washington or Abu Dhabi. The most vociferous of all was a journalist who had flown in, against advice, for one night, and had intended to fly out the next day. He had been stuck for a week. In a voluminous blue down-jacket, he would waddle to the airline office to complain. He said that 'for professional and personal reasons' he HAD to be in Geneva on Tuesday. He implied the Nepali pilots were cowards. He demanded an Air Force helicopter. Had anyone radioed for the helicopter?

'Yes,' the Nepali nodded, smiling dreamily into the fog.

Obviously, every time there was a fog, the tourists started yelling for helicopters.

'He should take up Tantric Buddhism,' I said, when the journalist was out of earshot. 'Then he could learn to levitate.'

1983